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ABSTRACT

Struggling job seekers want to know what work will give meaning to the 40-plus years they spend at it and a measure of happiness. The author suggests that career practitioners and supervisors can help if they know who we are when, what someone is in the career game for, and how we decide where next to grow. This paper will review the career stage models of Erikson, Levinson and Kegan and outline cautions about models and stages, and suggest how to work with them anyway. The author discusses the model she uses with clients and describes useful stage-of-life exercises. (Contains 14 references.) (GCP)

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Working With Career Stages

by
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Working With Career Stages

M. Rose Jonas

Introduction

Not to be a socialist at 20 is proof of want of heart;
to be one at 30 is proof of want of head.
Georges Clemenceau

For 50 years social scientists have considered how we traverse adulthood. They note our similarities: We begin work as apprentice-explorers. By age 45 crisis has hurricaned across our tidy notions of invulnerability or fairness. By 60 we gaze toward Handy's (1989) slower Third Age – retirement –more or less cynical, revered, fulfilled. That theoretical "we" today includes more than the white middle class American men originally studied, and the career journey is more complex. Plenty of room remains in the careers literature for theoretical growth (Savickas, 2001).

Struggling seekers want to know what work will give meaning to the 40-plus years they spend at it and a measure of happiness. Career practitioners and supervisors can help if they know who we are when, what someone is in the career game for, and how we decide where next to grow.

This paper will:

1. Review the career stage models of Erikson, Levinson and Kegan;
2. Outline cautions about models and stages, and suggest how to work with them anyway;
3. Discuss the model I use with clients; and
4. Describe useful stage-of-life exercises.

Erikson, Levinson And Kegan

At 15 my heart was set on learning;
at 30 I stood firm; at 40 I had no more doubts;
at 50 I knew the mandate of heaven;

at 60 my ear was obedient; at 70 I could follow my heart's desire without transgressing the norm.

-Confucius

Some stage models consider the life span; others part or all of the career. Super (1957), or Dalton, Thompson and Price (1977) are examples of such models. They acknowledge a distinctive march from youth to old age; none claim that unabated sap courses through veins of the hoary-headed. Because of their compassionate views of human capacity and its will to betterment, and their applicability to my work, I've borrowed mostly from the theories of Erikson (1964), Levinson (1978), and Kegan (1982).

Life is "the engagement of self with the world," says analyst Erik Erikson (1964). Each of his eight life stages has a developmental theme, a crisis and tasks. His stages are: trust/mistrust, autonomy/shame-doubt, initiative/guilt, industry/inferiority, identity/role confusion, intimacy/isolation, generativity/stagnation/self-absorption, and ego identity/despair.

Some themes that are meaningful to me about Erikson:

1. Action and resolution, not just knowledge, must be the goals;
2. We learn through interactions with the environment; and
3. Incomplete childhood work can haunt adulthood.

Yale psychologist Daniel Levinson (1978), from the gloomy perspective of his own middle years, studied 42 men and concluded that beyond youth we have stable periods of committed action, lasting 6 to 7 years, separated by uncomfortable transition periods of 4 to 5 years, when we evaluate earlier decisions and grapple toward a new stability. Levinson's work-life stages are: entering the adult world, settling down, entering middle adulthood, culmination of middle adulthood, and late adulthood.

Like Levinson I often see midlife depression among men *and* women. I, too, believe we must have the opportunity to change; otherwise, boredom and feelings of entrapment can lead to failure.

We are "meaning-making creatures," says Harvard educational psychologist Robert Kegan (1982). We are always in contest with environment or self; we want to be both included *and* independent. His symbol is an upward spiral, representing regularly occurring periods of stability and change, and developmental tasks. His lifespan selves are: incorporative, impulsive, imperial, interpersonal, institutional, and inter-individual.

I appreciate Kegan's passionate embrace of human possibility. Life does not have to be a pell-mell tumble to old age, but can be a rewarding upward journey.

Stages handily lay out a path. Unfortunately, the snail trail we leave through life's garden meanders, backtracks, drops off. And the creature

inhabiting the shell may differ from its theoretical construct. The next section discusses criticism of stage theory (and how practitioners can respond).

The Problem With Stages

> *The number of individuals who are claiming or defaulting to free agency is staggering. . .[T]here are roughly 16 million soloists, 3 million temp workers, and 13 million micropreneurs in the United States.*
>
> -Jan Austin

Today's tumultuous world has demolished the typology of stage theory: the middle-class man predictably progressing in a one-company sleigh. What about women, role shifts, a roiling marketplace without job stability (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996), career change and achievement in our older years (Vaillant, 2002)? How can a coach work with these?

1. *Models.* The criticism: models are simple and static; people's lives are complex and shifting, like a many-stranded "cat's cradle." We uniquely combine capabilities, values, drive and dreams. We should not be imprisoned in a deterministic stage model.

   Why to use models anyway. People love models' ability to depict complicated ideas. They see where they've been and what future strategies are needed.

2. *Age.* In workshops I never attach ages to the stages, but someone always asks, and another always protests when I do: "You can't put people in a box!" "Some 25-year-olds are already at the 'Disengagement' stage!"

   Why to use age anyway. (a) We *do* get older and less enthusiastic (no matter the dedication or passion), and we change relative to work's meaning and a career's satisfaction. The fear behind the objection is that employers prefer younger people and will ease out the older. That's often true. So, what should your strategy be against these cruel realities if you want to matter? (b) We go through similar stages with each new job or career: initially psyched but eventually bored. We should everywhere attend to stages' signals so we know when to go.

3. *A Complex World.* A career is a polymorphous creature influenced by: (a) Biology. Babies jolt career paths. Women have children at different career stages, and attach varying meaning to "work outside the

home." (b) Shifting values. Men work from home or leave the fast track for "work-life balance." A job may support a lifestyle, not the journey to a dream. (c) Business. People now have to manage their own careers; there are no lifetime jobs or career ladders. Work design and recruitment plans change as globalism, competition and cost control pound the market. (d) The economy. New MBAs are doing Depression-era scrambling for any non-mall job, questioning the value of the degree no one wants. Experienced IT managers watch jobs go offshore and scratch for "Plan B" jobs. (e) Gifts differing. We bring to the starting gate differing drive, skill, intelligence, talent, willingness. Capricious luck and opportunity accompany us. (f) Work populations. Two-income families are the norm. Gen X-ers (Tulgan, 2000) focus on the next opportunity. Gen Y-ers demand "me first." Boomers become "boomerangers" (Sullivan, 2003) because they can't retire.

> *Why to use stages anyway:* The coach's response must be: "So what? You have to get through this. What can we do with these challenges?"
> With a stage model as foundation, a client can build a rich, interesting life.

My Career Stages Model

> *Old age is like a minefield; if you see footprints leading to the other side, step in them.*
> -George E. Vaillant, M.D.

The intellectual indebtedness of my Career Stages Model is obvious. Its five stages occur at approximate ages, with "fuzzy" possible overlap years between because life events and time's passage also affect stage movement. For example, someone who enters the work force at age 18 will be at the competitive stage by 21. The birth of a child has significant impact. So do the crises that crash into our midlife.

This is a brief summary:

Age	*Stage*	*What's going on?*
22 – 25	Indoctrination confused inside.	Cocky outside, fearful/
25-38	Competitive	Focused and directed; push forachievement,advancement, establishing self.
38 - 48	Plateau	No longer a star, passed over; career no longer invigorates.
48 – 58	Stabilization	Skilled at, but less interested in , the game; seek intrinsic gratification.
58 – 65	Disengagement	Focusnext phase, family, pleasure, finances, health.

My model also provides observations/suggestions for each stage:

What's going on? – Happening within the individual.

Behaviors – What you SEE.

Feelings – What's INSIDE.

If this is you – "Me," that is.

If this is your staff – Strategies.

The following section shows how I put stages to work.

Exercises

If you think you can or you can't, you're probably right.
-Henry Ford

Career stage exercises help clients see a new life view and make better decisions. These rely more on clients' meaning-making than counselor wisdom.

Looking at Lifelines

This exercise asks clients to think about their life as lived, what matters to them, how they want their next timeframe to go. It works well with career beginners and mid-life wonderers.

1. Have the client make an XY-plane. The x-axis is age (20-65); the y-axis is "low-to-high." The client draws a line from entry age to now, moving high and low. The basis could be "your job satisfaction," "your energy level or drive or ambition," "the money you've made," whatever seems germane. The client then takes a step back and assesses, "How do I feel about my life so far?" "How do I want to go forward?"
2. For mid-career clients, it is particularly illustrative to add child-rearing and caring for parents. The instruction: "Draw a vertical line at the age you began having children. Make another line 20 years past your youngest child's birth and shade this period." The same line is made at the age when parent-care became an issue, also shaded. Mid-life piles upon us like coats on a bed at a wake. We get dissatisfied with careers and long for change. Opportunity doors don't fly open as before. We lose friends/family. Responsibilities crush us. One's multi-lined life-on-a-page is an eloquent picture of this era's stressors, leading, we hope, to, "I'm making some changes here."
3. For career newcomers the line forward is imaginary, but they see, "I won't be all energy forever. I'd better get moving." "I don't have to decide my whole life today. I can change my mind."

The Job Doctor's Crystal Ball

Few people know what they want, though they believe everyone else does. Michael wonders if he should take a promotion to a big city. Karen, just leaving an executive director's job, puzzles about what's next. Jane, recently downsized, thinks about starting a business. This exercise can give them a crystal-clear picture of the next few years. The process:

1. A blank sheet of paper, on which the client writes the current year in the upper left-hand corner, and another in the upper right-hand corner. . .5, 7 or 10 years from now, whatever feels relevant.
2. Down the left side of the page go facts salient to the client today: My age, ages of spouse and kids, jobs my spouse and I hold, our salaries, parents and their ages, current situations ("Dad just had a heart attack," "My company is being acquired and I'm in a losing division.") Next, dreams and goals.
3. Then the client returns to the facts and "walks" into future time. ("In 5 years I'll be 45, my wife 42. My kids will be 12 and 9.") As each fact/dream gets advanced, insight dawns. The coach

asks, "Tell me what you see and what it means to you." Michael realizes his wife's real estate business isn't transferable, but in 5 years he can go, especially if he gets marketing exposure. Karen understands her next job should be in the public arena to get her dream job in 7 years. Given her husband's up-and-down therapist income, Jane realizes one wage-earner must get paid benefits.

4. Aided by coaching questions such as, "What are you up for now?" and "What are you in it [the career game] for?" direction and tasks become clear. The client leaves with a strategy and less anxiety, at least for now.

Is this Familiar. . .?

A nudge at someone's past holds clues to current behaviors. Our yesterdays influence today. The coach, however, may feel more or less equipped to deal with such "hot" content as a visit to a client's childhood.

In introductory sessions, I think it's important to get a birth-to-now view of the person, and in ongoing coaching, to discuss earlier experiences that land clients in a rut. For example, an ambitious HR manager was confounded by her backing down from a funding fight at a budget meeting.

"Does any of this feel familiar?" I asked. Yes. She was never permitted as a child to oppose her authoritarian father. In her meeting she had adopted her meek childhood posture during the growling match with her boss.

Clients may be willing to discuss it or write in a journal about it or take suggestions about "kid stuff" as a way to heal it.

Summary And Conclusions

> *We run up against perturbing, disturbing experiences which throw the balance off temporarily, but the balance is very hardy and it tends to wave its big arms and right itself.*
>
> -Robert Kegan

Once beyond certain foundational truths, people are extraordinarily complex. One size does not fit all. This paper has applied the theories of Erikson, Levinson and Kegan to the work I do with clients, and shown career professionals how to do the same. In the next theoretical iteration, the symbol (not model) for the evolving adult will reflect the sometimes chaotic life dance. . .a mandala, hologram or virtual path.

The career coach or supervisor must be as skilled at emotional issues as theory. What is important isn't, after all, what happens to clients, but the

meaning they assign and the action they take as a result. It's a privilege to be on the path with them.

In memory of Elbert W. Burr,
who helped me expand his initial stage organization.

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